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Strickland, Lloyd ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2560-6909>
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How the World Thinks: A Global History of Philosophy

By Julian Baggini

Granta, 432pp, £20.00 and £14.99

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English-language histories of philosophy published over the last two centuries have typically followed the same script: philosophy arose out of the blue in ancient Greece about 2,600 years ago, when Thales theorized that water was the fundamental principle of nature. It was then developed by the Greeks, Romans and other European thinkers, notably from Germany, France and Britain, with more recent contributions from America. The clear implication is that anything worthy of the name philosophy occurred in the West.

Thankfully, things are now changing. Over the last decade or so, there have been many calls for western philosophy to abandon its traditional insularism, most provocatively in Bryan Van Norden's *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (2017). Peter Adamson's ambitious multi-volume series, *A History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps* (2014-), has made a positive start in addressing this. We may now add Julian Baggini's *How the World Thinks*, which seeks to cover many different philosophical traditions in just under 400 pages. To achieve this, he wisely adopts a thematic rather than chronological approach, dividing the book into five parts: "What the World Knows", "How the World Is", "Who in the World Are We?", "How the World Lives" and "Concluding Thoughts", each containing between two and eight chapters that focus on specific philosophical concepts such as logic, time and harmony.

There is a heavy emphasis on Chinese and Indian philosophy, and – to a lesser extent – Japanese and Islamic philosophy (and, in the book's final few pages, Russian philosophy). By his own admission, Baggini is expert only in western philosophy, so he adopts the approach of a "philosophical journalist", reading a number of key texts and conducting interviews with leading scholars. Most chapters begin with him recounting personal experiences of conferences attended, visits to temples, museums and art galleries, films watched on planes etc. Such anecdotes serve to illustrate how the philosophies under discussion are reflected in the real world and so extend beyond dry, academic works.

As befits an exercise in comparative philosophy, Baggini identifies both points of contact and points of divergence. He does not make generalisations about different cultures and their philosophies, or draw sharp distinctions between them, but instead seeks the “tendencies, trends and emphases” that make each tradition distinct.

He also ends many chapters with suggestions about what the West can learn from non-western philosophies: that it ought to reconsider its notion of rationality, with its heavy emphasis on logic; that “we might find models [in eastern philosophies] for living as mortals in a natural world”; and that “ideas about individuals and society in China and Japan can help us rebalance Western culture, with its emphasis on individualism and autonomy”.

On the positive side, Baggini does an excellent job of showing that the western philosophical tradition is only one among many. On the negative side, while his coverage of Eastern philosophies – Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Islam – is generally very good, he says nothing at all about Jewish philosophy and very little about African philosophy.

Despite these reservations, *How the World Thinks* is highly readable, offering an entertaining (if not entirely impartial) journey through some of the world’s philosophies which should endear it to the general reader, while philosophers weary of western parochialism will find much of interest too.

Lloyd Strickland is professor of philosophy and intellectual history at Manchester Metropolitan University.